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This account of the growth of the Nupe Church in Nigeria and its experiments in evangelism has been written by the Rev. Peter R. Lapage, a missionary of the Church Missionary Society.

EVANGELISM IN THE NUPE CHURCH

The Nupe tribe are often called the "waterside people", as they live along the banks of the great river Niger in what is known as the "middle belt" of Nigeria.

The first contact with the West that is known was when the saintly Bishop Crowther (a rescued and converted slave) sailed up the Niger on a mission to the interior in the middle of the last century; it was not however till the turn of the century that missionaries of the Church Missionary Society travelled up the river from Lokoja and established themselves in Bida.

With the permission of the Etsu (the Nupe King) they established a school, and began itinerating in the surrounding district. Several small village churches thus sprung into existence. The people are all farmers, and very poor. All the food, and a certain amount of the clothing is produced locally, though more cloth is now being bought from abroad.

Progress was slow until in 1930 there arose a great persecution of the Christians in one of the villages by the Moslems. The results were in reverse of what the persecutors intended, and the church was greatly strengthened, and made a big advance in membership.

In the 1940's, the church was the spearhead of a big adult literacy drive, and many were added to the church through being taught to read by the local evangelist. When however the government took over and organised adult literacy on a much larger scale, this "handle" dropped away from the church.

There were by this time some 33 village churches each with an evangelist, and one African pastor, and a missionary. The area is large (some 100 miles long by 50 broad) and with very few roads, it took the pastor and missionary all their time to visit. Each month the evangelists came into Bida for

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adjustment of church finances, and a time of fellowship; in addition three times a year (during the school holidays) they all came in with their wives for a refresher course.

Several of the senior evangelists were under training for the ministry, and in 1955 two were ordained, while two others were able to go to college for further training.

The pastor and missionary however realised that with all this training, some new venture in evangelism must be thought out and prayed about, to see in what way God was calling for a new advance in that line. It was felt that the first step should be one of Revival, with the idea of encouraging the local churches to carry on with their own evangelism in the villages.

Accordingly in the dry season of 1957, three "Revival Meetings" were organised and held in different parts of the district. Each sub-area was responsible for its own organisation for meetings, and inviting people from the villages in its area. A central team consisting of the African pastor, the missionary, and two other evangelists visited each sub-area in turn to join with the local churches in conducting the meetings and meeting the people. (The dry season - December-March - is the best time for activities such as this, as there is no farming in progress, and all are free to attend.)

It is hard, and perhaps even dangerous to try to assess the results of these meetings; many discovered a forgotten faith, many were roused to a new sense of responsibilities, and a few found Christ for the first time. One thing however is clear and that is that the church was greatly strengthened, and given a new sense of its responsibility to those around. The sense of fellowship grew, and many lonely and scattered Christians found a great sense of fellowship in the realisation of belonging to something bigger than the local church.

Each sub-area was left to work out its own follow-up plan.

Towards the middle of 1957, many of the Christians were seeking for a further advance, and together we prayed about plans. One of the newly ordained suggested a big meeting in one of the villages to which should be invited all Christians and their non-Christian friends; the idea of the meeting being mainly evangelistic. To this end we planned for the dry season of 1958.

The Christians of the village of Doko, constructed a huge shade shelter to accommodate around 1500 people (the church holds barely 250). Arrangements were made for communal feeding in the village for the many visitors expected. One compound managed to feed 200 people for the ten days duration of the Convention, a very good effort. Each Christian visitor was asked to contribute 3/- towards the cost of food, but non-Christians were to be treated as guests. It was decided to invite a visiting speaker who came from Maidugri, some 700 miles away. His air passage together with all the other convention expenses were eventually covered by gifts and thanksgiving offerings at the convention itself.

We all lived at Doko for the ten days, camping out in different houses; the little village school rooms were also used. It was very hot, and the mosquitos were very active! As for the daily programme, we started each day with a prayer meeting and Bible study; then after breakfast came the main convention address by the visiting speaker; he was intensely practical and

introduced many local objects of interest including charms, bottles, hoes, and garments, to illustrate the point he was trying to get across. After this talk, the company split up into groups for discussion under an evangelist or chosen teacher. These groups proved most helpful. The early part of the afternoons were given to personal interviews and then at 4 p.m. we forgathered for an evangelistic address by the evangelists themselves, prior to a procession by the Christians to one of the nearby villages or to the local district head, or village headman for open air witness. In this way the neighbourhood felt that they were included in the gathering. Processions were carried out in true African style with drums, singing, and dancing. It was a very happy time, and a great encouragement to the weaker brethren. After supper the staff (evangelists, pastors, missionaries) met for preparation and prayer for the following day.

All these daily meetings were attended by about 1000 Nupe farmers and their wives and at the two weekends there were about 1500 excluding children. For a Moslem village this was a quite remarkable effort, and it was noticed subsequently that the Moslems had erected a shelter just the same as ours for their own purposes!

The final meeting was a big service of baptism, when some thirty young folk made public confession of their faith and were baptised; two of these had suffered severe persecution at home and had been forbidden to attend the convention by their Moslem parents; it was a fine and impressive sight to see these young people so eager to "put on Christ". Many more were received into the catechumenate, and well over 100 of those who had come as pagans went home with a decision card that they had repented and turned to the Lord as their Saviour. All of these were put into touch with the evangelist of their village (or area) before the convention ended.

Again it is difficult to judge results, but two things can be said:

1. It proved to be a tremendous strengthening of the spiritual life of the church; a sense of unity and fellowship was felt, and many started on the road of the Christian life;

2. It proved to be a great act of witness to the whole countryside; in an area where the church is a minority, this was of great value.

In July 1958, all the church and school work was handed over by the mission to the local church. The senior African pastor, who had been for a year's experience to U.K. became the vicar of the newly formed parish, and also rural dean of a newly formed rural deanery.

This venture of faith, we believe to be of the Holy Spirit, and in view of the impending independence of the country as a whole, it does not seem premature.

All our prayers are urgently needed for this Nupe church and its leaders with their new responsibilities, especially in the days ahead with national independence, and the consequent possibility of a resurgence of Islam.